

IS THERE A ROLE FOR  
GOVERNMENT IN CO-OPERATION?

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LIMITED

I am very pleased to be contributing to these discussions which should be so important in our progress towards more co-operative life.

All of you who have read the information paper, or listened to Bill Kilpatrick just now, must be impressed with the glow of optimism which shines through most of the prescriptions for our future. There always have been sceptics on the role of Government, and just to give a base line, I would like to quote Thomas Payne who some two hundred years ago said "Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil, in its worst state an intolerable one". Well, that was said before co-operatives were invented, so perhaps we can be more optimistic. As one who has a concern for the present state of co-operatives, and hope for their future, I find no profound fault with this theme of optimism, but I would like to qualify my general enthusiasm with some specific cautions and suggestions.

Firstly, the role that has been suggested by Bill Kilpatrick is flushed with the youthful enthusiasm that new men bring to an old task. Several times we have been told that Government, both in the Parliament and the bureaucracy, has passed into the hands of a new breed of sensitive and enlightened people. I think that can be well supported. The fact that we are here engaged in this discussion is evidence itself. Yet in planning for the future role of Government, surely we should be realistic and accept that this Government we are talking about changes in its quality and emphasis quite often.

If today's Government says it is more sensitive to societies needs and enlightened regarding solutions, it is making a comparison with Governments that went before. Change has occurred in one direction, but we should plan on the basis that there will be further changes. We should assume perhaps a normal level of sensitivity and fair average quality for enlightenment. We should thus plan for structures that can harness enthusiasm when available, but are flexible enough to make progress when the official climate is less benign.

Secondly, Bill Kilpatrick has referred to a partnership of 50 - 50 proportions between the Co-operative Movement and Government on the proposed State Co-operative Councils. As the information paper has stated, there is an ambivalent relationship (and this is historical, it has happened for a long time), between these two parties and my co-operative experience and this morning's discussion supports that view.

Just as we have difficulty in resolving who is them, and who is us the citizens, we have the same problem with groups of citizens making up co-operatives. I suggest we see the Government as them, when they act against our perceived interests, but as us when we seek their help with common concern. These attitudes change over time and future circumstances will decide what balance is to be struck.

My farming background may colour my judgement here, but I would prefer to cast the government in a role more of support than of equal partnership. Farmers have learnt that while Government has a valuable nurturing role, it can be an inflexible and remote master. Perhaps that is a comment on the poor quality of past communication with

Government, and hence lack of rapport, but it also speaks for the independent spirit which values innovation and enterprise, while not rejecting social responsibility.

On balance, I suggest that the co-operative movement would welcome Government involvement in our future, more as a catalyst change than as a basic ingredient. A catalyst in the right environment enables the process to go forward that would not happen in the absence of such a catalyst, and yet it is not consumed in the reaction. Thus Government may bring supporting services, new ideas and initiatives and perhaps help to instil a uniform direction within this fermentation vat of diverse co-operative enterprises. There is a danger that, if Government assumes too large a role, the co-operative movement will become dependent and stagnant.

As Bert Kelly has said many times "everyone is happy to take milk when the Government cow is in full production, but don't they squeal when the cow inevitably goes dry". When considering the future role of Government, the balance is also to be reached in the roles of regulation and promotion of co-operatives. It is often difficult for the one office or agency to provide the regulation which the society requires in matters of conduct and reporting, while also being a source of advice, support and encouragement. That is where ambivalence crops up on the Government's side.

I quoted from Thomas Payne on Government at the start of these remarks, perhaps I could sum up now referring to his contemporary, Edmund Burke, who had a more positive view and one which supports the thread of this discussion, when he said "Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom".